

PERSONALITY PROFILING

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Introduction

The particular blend of traits and characteristics that people possess and carry around with them in all situations are what make them unique. This pattern of traits and characteristics are not fully duplicated in any other person and are generally stable over time. These distinctive aspects of people, known as “personality,” hold important implications on the way in which people behave in organisations and, as such, significant research effort has been put into examining the applied links between personality and organisational behaviour. The following paragraphs will discuss research findings in the context of several personality traits which have been found to be related to and influential upon organisational behaviour, and will conclude that attention to personality in organisations’ selection procedures may be crucial to their survival and success.

Definition & Context

Personality may be described as “the unique and relatively stable pattern of behaviour, thoughts and emotions shown by individuals” (Carver & Scheier, 1993). Behaviour is arguably the result of both an individual’s personality and the nature of the situation he/she experiences. This reflects what is known as the interactionist perspective (Pervin, 1985). One of the implications of this perspective is that there may be some work environments that more closely match the personalities of some people than others. This suggests that when a person’s personality is particularly well suited to the job he/she is employed to do, he/she is likely to be more satisfied and productive than someone less well matched. This concept is known as the “person-job fit” (Caldwell & O’Reilly, 1990). Indeed Caldwell et al (1990) have demonstrated, by identifying characteristics crucial to the success of jobs in a range of occupations, that this is in fact so.

Hyland (1985) distinguished three frameworks within which mechanisms and processes of personality are accounted for. Firstly, the physiological account which can be illustrated by Eysenck’s cortical arousal mechanisms, and his three-factor model of extraversion, neuroticism (emotional stability) and psychoticism, which was largely based on Galen’s (150 AD) four typologies of sanguine, melancholy, phlegmatic and choleric; secondly, the mentalistic account which can be illustrated by, for example, cognitive attributions of aversive events such as Seligman’s (1967) learned helplessness; and thirdly, the mechanistic account, for example, the reductionist theory of Freud.

Different Methods of Measurement

Anastasi (1982) refers to personality testing as “an objective and standardised measure of a sample of behaviour.” Some of the usual methods of measuring personality include the assessment of life data, for example, in the interview situation where the candidate may be asked to give evidence of possessing a trait by describing how he/she acted in a past situation that, ideally, resembles situations to be encountered in the job; paper and pencil questionnaire data which generally use multiple-choice or Likert-type scales, and test data in which simulations of critical job elements, through work samples and assessment centres, are assessed.

Alternative open-projective techniques such as graphology and the Rorschach allow persons to express their deeper, unconscious layers of personality; however, there is scientific doubt about the validity of projection. When deciding on a method, it is important to consider the different kinds of validity, fairness, impact upon candidates and the reliability of the respective methods.

Background

Personality measurement has long been a controversial topic in psychology and, since the mid 1960s, psychologists have been divided with regard to personality testing. Mischel (1968) claimed that the validity of personality measures was very low and, for similar reasons, Guion (1965) questioned the wisdom and morality of using personality tests as instruments of decision in employment procedures. Largely on the basis of these claims, academic researches ceased to give much attention to personality measures (Schneider & Hough, 1995). At the same time, psychologists working in industry rather than the academy continued to use personality inventories (Dunnette & Hough, 1993) and, despite the pessimistic conclusions of the 1960s, they have been seen to make a valid contribution to personnel selection and assessment (Hogan, 1991; Muchinsky, 1993).

The 1980s and 1990s saw an accelerating return to the acceptability of personality research, particularly in the context of organisations. Notwithstanding this, the adequacy of the lexical hypothesis as a basis for developing scientifically compelling taxonomy of personality has been questioned on the grounds that it yields taxonomies based on folk constructs rather than scientific constructs (Tellegen, 1993). In addition, Block (1993) expressed doubt that single-word trait descriptors can do justice to many of the complexities of human personality, a point that had been made much earlier by Allport and Odbert (1936).

Current Trends & Applications

There is nevertheless now a general agreement among researchers that there are five broad, orthogonal dimensions of personality, known as the “big five” (Fiske, 1949; Norman, 1963; Costa & McCrae, 1985; Goldberg, 1990). However, researchers are currently taking one of two routes when selecting personality traits to use in their research. Some use the five-factor model (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hough, 1992) or variants thereof (Hogan, 1982), whilst others use more face-valid work-related traits such as customer service orientation for example, or integrity (Hogan & Hogan, 1984).

The questionnaire method of personality measurement and assessment is the most frequently used method due to its cost-effectiveness and time-saving qualities. One of the most widely used is Costa & McCrae’s (1992) Revised NEO-PIR Personality Inventory. Other popular measures are Cattell’s 16PF (personality factor) scale which has recently been extensively revised as the 16PF5, with 51% of the items being new or significantly changed; and the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ), (Saville & Holdsworth, 19??) which was developed to assess personality constructs of most relevance to the workplace, and which uses 5 sections, each measuring 30 personality dimensions based on the big-five model.

Russell & Karel (1994) demonstrated correlations between the 16PF and the NEO-PIR scales which, although appeared to be fairly correspondent, still had differences. However, other studies show that both questionnaires have poor internal consistency. Given that the available measures provide similar, but not identical information on personality, choice of measure should be guided primarily by evidence of a measure’s validity in the occupational context of interest, as opposed to say the visual attractiveness/face validity of the questionnaire.

The following paragraphs will discuss activities in the two main approaches to personality measurement outlined above.

The Big Five

Working within the framework of the “Big-five,” Barrick and Mount (1991; 1993) reviewed over 200 studies of the relationship between personality variables and aspects of organisational behaviour such as job performance and satisfaction.

Conscientiousness

Not surprisingly, they found that conscientiousness was a good predictor of performance for all job types. However, Hough (1992) illustrated that that conscientiousness may have been over-

emphasised in this study, at the expense of other personality traits. In addition, Hogan & Hogan (1993) demonstrated that the relationship might vary across occupational type, for example, with artistic jobs showing a negative correlation. Ones & Viswesvaran (1997) have developed a theory of conscientiousness at work, according to which, highly conscientious individuals show greater productivity than less conscientious individuals because they spend more time on tasks they are assigned, acquire greater job knowledge, set goals autonomously and persist in following them, go beyond the role requirements in the workplace, and avoid counter-productive behaviours. Obvious really!

Emotional Stability

More surprising, was the fact that emotional stability was not found to be related to performance. Perhaps this may have been because those who are least stable leave their jobs, leaving a restricted sample of relatively stable individuals in the research. However, Meta-analyses of validities indicate that emotional stability, conscientiousness and agreeableness predict performance involving interpersonal interaction (Mount, Barrick & Stewart, 1998).

Extraversion/Agreeableness

Extraversion was highly related to success in managerial and sales positions, and highly predictive of training proficiency; this may be because learning is better facilitated when the learner is active rather than passive. However, agreeableness was not related to performance among these groups. Again perhaps it is possible that the only people who remain on the job are those who are agreeable enough to get by.

Openness

Openness was found to be a valid predictor for success in training. Perhaps this is because individuals who score highly on this dimension have a positive attitude towards learning experiences, and hence, this explanation would be consistent with Goldstein's (1980) view that individuals who are motivated when starting a training programme have an advantage from the beginning. Openness also correlated with measures of cognitive ability and this indicates that it may actually be a measure of ability to learn rather than motivation to learn.

Criticisms of the Big-Five Model

Despite the evidence in its favour, the five factor model has been criticised by some researchers, who have expressed reservations about its adequacy both within the personality sphere (Eysenck, 1993) and in the organisational sphere (Hough, 1992), and by those who argue that the model cannot incorporate other respected personality taxonomies (Waller & Ben-

Porath (1987). The five-factor model yields information about higher-order factor structures of personality, but ignores, confounds, or otherwise obscures understanding of variables combined into the five broad factors (Hough, 1997). In an intermediate position, Hogan & Roberts, (1996) maintain that the nature of the criterion dictates what personality predictors are most appropriate and that the question is not “broad” vs. “narrow,” but rather “broad” vs. “broader” conceptualisations of personality measurement. Hogan (1982), in particular, argued that extraversion should be divided into two conceptually distinct factors of sociability and assertiveness (which he subsequently labelled ambition), resulting in a six-factor taxonomy. Similarly, Hough (1997) argues for a more refined taxonomy, distinguishing achievement from conscientiousness and extraversion and affiliation from extraversion. Meta-analyses demonstrate the importance of these distinctions for predicting managerial performance (Hough, 1998) and sales performance (Vinchur, Schippmann & Roth, 1998).

More Face-Valid, Work-Related Traits

Although the five-factor model continues to enjoy considerable support (Hough & Oswald, 2000), within the more face-valid, work-related school of thought, several important personality constructs, not within the five factor model, have been used for predicting work behaviour.

Integrity

One construct that has received steady research attention in recent years is that of integrity. Sackett, Burriss and Callahan (1989) distinguished two types of integrity tests – overt integrity tests which consist of attitudes towards and admissions of dishonest and illegal behaviour, and personality-based measures, which use personality items to predict a wide range of counterproductive behaviours, including impulsivity, hostility towards authority, violence proneness, long-term job commitment, thrill seeking, and morality. Examples of counterproductive behaviours associated with lack of integrity include disciplinary problems, violence on the job, excessive absenteeism, tardiness, drug abuse and theft.

Ones, Viswesvaran & Schmidt (1993) suggested that integrity tests operationalise the negative pole of the big-five’s conscientiousness. However, the content themes of integrity measures suggest that neuroticism also relates to integrity (Schneider & Hough, 1995). Measures of integrity have been shown to correlate substantially both with overall job performance and with counterproductive behaviours, and indeed, it has been claimed that these tests have higher validity on average than any of the big-five traits by themselves (Ones, Viswesvaran & Schmidt, 1993). In addition, this research produced several other useful observations regarding the use of integrity tests. Firstly, response distortion, did not appear to reduce the criterion-related validities of the tests to any great extent; secondly, the available evidence indicated that the

correlations between integrity tests and tests of cognitive ability were negligible – this being the case, it is likely that integrity measures will have substantial incremental validity over and above cognitive ability measures. Thirdly, the evidence indicated that no mean differences were found between ethnic minorities and whites on integrity measures, thus, adverse impact is not a problem. Finally, it has been reported that, when integrity and conscientiousness measures are taken together, they produce higher correlations with performance than either one on its own (Borman, Hansen & Hedge, 1997).

Customer-Service Orientation

Another work-related construct that has attracted significant research attention is customer service orientation and, given the continuing shift to a more service-orientated economy, this is seen as an important factor in many workplaces. Hogan & Hogan (1986) developed a service orientation scale, the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI), which seeks to identify persons who are pleasant, courteous, co-operative and helpful in dealing with customers, clients and colleagues. A more recently developed measure of service orientation is McLellan & Pajanen's (1994) Customer Service Inventory (CSI), for which reasonably good criterion related validity has been reported (Schneier & Hough, 1995). McDaniel & Frei (1993) carried out a meta-analysis of customer service measures, including the HCI and the CSI and, surprisingly, reported that their validity did not differ for global assessments of job performance and job performance measures that targeted customer service behaviours. But perhaps the samples selected were from occupational groups where job performance is so heavily saturated with customer service that overall job performance, is in effect, customer service performance (Schneider & Hough, 1995).

Contextual Performance

Borman & Motowildo (1993) hypothesised that personality is more predictive of contextual performance (that is, organisational citizenship and pro-social behaviour, law abiding behaviour, teamwork, effort, leadership and personal discipline) than it is of task performance. They illustrated that the constructs of potency, achievement, dependability, adjustment and agreeableness all correlate with the various aspects of contextual performance. Job performance is clearly multi-dimensional in that criterion tend to weight both technical and contextual performance. This may explain why it is that, although cognitive ability variables may outpredict personality variables for some performance dimensions (Hunter & Hunter, 1984), personality variables outpredict cognitive ability on other performance dimensions. This is particularly so for contextual performance, which *support* the more technical activities of an organisation (Borman, Hanson & Hedge, 1997).

Moderators

Schneider and House (1995) propose that the link between personality factors and job performance is moderated by factors that are, in nature, personal (low self-monitors are more predictable), situational (high autonomy jobs have lower situational strength and thus personality predicts performance better in them) and criterion (the validity of achievement via conformance and independence may be different in high and low structure workplaces).

Indeed Barrick and Mount (1993) found that personality might be more important in jobs providing a high degree of autonomy. Other studies have shown that associations between personality and performance are often highly sensitive to variations in the cognitive task demands, for example, extraverts seem to perform better when the task makes high demands, whereas introverts are superior at vigilance and reflective problem-solving. Intuitively therefore, it would seem that moderators of agreeableness are likely to relate to social rather than task factors. Hough's 1992 review suggests that agreeableness is related to superior teamwork, but that it reduces creativity, indicating a trade off between accommodating the needs of others and independence of thought.

Whilst correlations in these studies are typically low, research in this area has shown some promise as a means of incrementing personality-performance correlations. However, the results to date have been too inconsistent to be regarded as conclusive.

Faking

Virtually every study of personality in a selection context has used self-reports to measure personality constructs. Barrick and Mount (1996) demonstrated that although slanting of responses as a consequence of impression management occurred (always a source of anxiety for test administrators), validity of the responses was not adversely affected. On the other hand, Snell & McDaniel, 1998 in Hough & Oswald, 2000) asserted that distortion seriously reduces criterion related validity. What is not clear though, is the amount of distortion that occurs in natural applicant settings (Hough & Oswald, 2000), although Rosse, Stecher, Levin & Miller (1998) established that applicants scored, on average, 0.69 DS higher than incumbents. Ability and motivation to fake may be key determinants in the amount of distortion found in applicant settings (Snell et al, 1998, in Hough et al, 2000), but meta-analysis has indicated that explicit warnings not to distort do, in fact, reduce distortion (Dwight & Donovan, 1998). Christianses, Goffin, Johnson and Rothstein (1994) found that motivational distortion of answers in the 16PF had no effect on validity. In contrast to Rosse's et al (1998) study, other similar studies have found significantly less distortion generally occurring (Hough, 1998). Coaching individuals on personality tests also potentially threatens the effectiveness of traditional social desirability

scales, but subtle items can be more resistant to coaching and distortion than obvious items (Alliger, Lilienfeld & Mitchell, 1996, in Hough et al, 2000).

Ones, Viswesvaran & Korb, (1995) have suggested that those who may want to use personality variables in personnel selection should compile specific norms with applicant samples as an alternative to the common practise of correcting scores for social desirability, which may adversely affect the reliability (and validity) of test.

Alternatively, the use of ipsative or forced-choice questionnaires, whereby the candidate must choose one or two options from each item that best describes him/her. The results do not provide information about the position of a candidate on a trait relative to other candidates, but diagnoses the extent to which someone exhibits a trait relative to other traits – within the candidate. Whilst this may add a control to the social desirability effect, many applicants object to having to choose one alternative, when they feel that few of the alternatives fit them.

In addition, Mount, Barrick & Strauss (1994) found that observer ratings (supervisor, peer and customer) of the big-five constructs added to the prediction of job performance beyond self-reports alone.

Practical Issues in Selection

Hogan, Hogan and Roberts (1996) contend that whilst personality, if measured using well-constructed instruments, is a valid predictor of job performance in virtually all occupations, such measures should be used together with other selection methods. Given that correlations between personality and performance still tend to be modest (at .2 or .3 which, nowadays is accepted as useful for guiding selection decisions), this seems to be good advice. In support, whilst ability tests have been found to demonstrate moderately high validity (Hunter & Hunter, 1984), Ones et al (1993) have demonstrated an incremental validity of personality measures (specifically integrity) beyond ability measures alone. Encouragingly, Robertson & Kinder (19??) have similarly demonstrated this with a wider range of personality measures.

There is nevertheless a potential for uninformed misuse of personality measures and, for this reason, the BPS has established competency standards (Level B Certificate) for the administration of personality measures in occupational settings. This comprises both knowledge and professional skills, for example, in giving feedback. However, whilst there are good reasons for these controls, there are also potential drawbacks. Fletcher (1994) has suggested, that if controls become increasingly rigorous, this may restrict the use of these measures to a small number of competent professionals, and restrict academic research.

Personality within Organisations

In recent years, writers have tended to apply personality labels such as neurotic to organisations, probably due to the growth of interest in organisational culture and person-organisation fit. Writers search for attributes that may distinguish excellent organisations from others and Schneider (1987) proclaims that important organisational variables are strongly influenced by the personalities of important people in their service.

Conclusion

Some personality scales are based on the big five taxonomy, whilst other have used constructs with more face valid connections to the workplace. The available research findings indicate that more work-related constructs appear to be more predictive of performance criteria than the big-five. Indeed, a recent review of meta-analysis concluded that the five factors do not correlate highly with job performance (Matthews, 1997) at all, and it seems likely that some additions or modifications to the model will eventually become necessary. In particular it seems that, when strong hypothesis about specific trait-specific criterion links can be made, narrower trait constructs will show better prediction (Schneider et al, 1996). In the light of the foregoing, it does not seem advisable to view the five-factor model as an adequate taxonomy. Whilst the five-factor model should certainly inform future research, scepticism about its comprehensiveness and reality seem valid. The challenge now is to understand in greater depth the nature of personality, performance, and the path that connects them. Finally, although response distortion does not appear to have a major impact on personality inventory validity in a selection context, it is still of some concern that such measures are fakeable. It seems there is still much to be done in the field of personality research. In the meantime, it is evident that the addition of personality measures to other selection techniques significantly enhances the validity of selection decisions which, in today's competitive economy and climate of skills shortages, may be critical to an organisation's success and survival.